

Comics: Meet the Artist Lance Aldrich Cartoonist, "Real Life Adventures"

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Welcome to the Washington Post Style section comics discussion, hosted by Comics page editor Suzanne Tobin. This week, Tobin welcomes Lance Aldrich of "Real Life Adventures."

Aldrich will join Tobin online Friday, April 9 at 1 p.m. ET to discuss "Real Life Adventures" and the art of cartooning.

Submit questions either before or during the discussion.

Editor's Note: washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

Suzanne Tobin: Welcome, comics fans, to another edition of "Comics: Meet the Artist." Today our guest is Lance Aldrich, who along with Gary Wise, created "Real Life Adventures," which The Post carries online. Lance is joining us from his studio in Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan. Welcome, Lance, and thanks for joining us Live Online.

Lance Aldrich: Thanks, Suzanne, it's great to be here. I didn't even realize we were carried online by a publication that is as famous as The Washington Post. I knew we were in the Los Angeles Times, but this was a pleasant surprise and an honor to find out we're carried online by one of the nation's premier newspaper. Hell, it's an honor to be published anywhere!

Suzanne Tobin: I understand cartooning was not your first career. Can you tell us how you got into it?

Lance Aldrich: Gary Wise and I have been partners in crime in an

advertising firm since 1985. I'm a writer and he's an art director. We worked together on print ads and commercials. We were just sitting around in Gary's office one day and I was reading the paper and I looked at the comics and I said, "God, alot of these just suck. I think we could do this." So in the next two to three weeks, we came up with 12 panels. We think in short bursts, that's just the nature of advertising. You have to crystallize thing into 30 seconds or three paragraphs, or whatever. So we did 12 panels and sent them off to all the syndicates we could find an address for. And two of them were very interested. And we ended up going with Universal Press, because at that time, about 1990, they had all the hot properties, like Far Side, Doonesbury, Cathy and Calvin and Hobbes. We got a letter from Universal, which was just once sentence, that says, "Mr. Lee Salem would like to see 12 more." He's the editor at Universal and he just wanted to make sure we hadn't used up out entire life experience in the first 12. So we submitted those in a week or so, and they put us on what was called a development contract. We did panels just as though we were doing them for publication, on the same deadline schedule. Sort of like doing the real thing, but with training wheels. That's usually about six months long, but after a month, they figured out we could do it, and they launched our panel. And we got our first paper, I think it was the Atlanta Constitution-Journal, and we've been doing it ever since.

Lee's Summit, Mo.: As cartooning buckeroos, how do you communicate with each other? In person? By e-mail? On the phone?

Lance Aldrich: When we first started, we were just feeling our way through. And we used to meet after work at Gary's apartment, with pizza and a six-pack of beer, and that didn't work all that well, because after three beers a piece we couldn't tell if we were funny or just stupid. So what it basically evolved into is the same way we worked in advertising. We had two full-time jobs, essentially. We were both full-time in the advertising firm and then working this comic strip, which is also a full-time job. Neither of us likes to sit in a room and stare at the other one, we bore the hell out of each other. What I do is I think about it 24 hours a day and I write probably two to three hours a day. That's all I can stand. At the end of a couple of weeks, I have maybe three pages of ideas. Most of them are just dialogue between two characters. I very rarely suggest visuals. Because I love the way Gary interprets things. And alot of times he'll change a joke or rewrite it a little bit, and then he faxes stuff to

me. So I would walk into his office with these pages and drop them off and run. I didn't want to sit there and watch him judge them. It's just like school, you don't want to watch your paper being graded. My labor, the way I work, is like Chinese water torture. It's constant and it's always on your mind. His way, the way he works, he goes through two days of hell every week because it's really labor intensive to draw them and to cut out the zipatone and he does it all by hand, even though he's very computer literate. He does everything the old fashioned way. After 38 years, in 2003, I left the advertising business, and since then we communicate by phone and fax. He calls me and says, "Turn on your fax I'm sending you some stuff." And I'll say "I'm sending you some pages, too." Then I do the captions, if they need captions. And that's the last we hear of each other until the next week. After 13 years, it's still exciting to get Gary's panels over the fax. It's like opening a Christmas present every week. He still cracks me up. I love the way he interprets things or the little touches he adds, and he gets a wonderful kick out of drawing lips the way he does. They're like duck lips. He started doing that 5 or 6 years ago because it amused. This is probably way more than you wanted to know, but it's my hour and I can do damn well whatever I want with it.

Kansas City: Do you have any cartoons tacked up on your refrigerator? If so, which one(s)?

Lance Aldrich: My wife always puts up the Sunday panels on the refrigerator if she likes them. My wife is my best source of material, she's very funny and sarcastic. I think her favorite that was up there for years was about wallpapering a small bathroom together--which is something we actually did. Actually, almost all the cartoons are something we've experienced...you're pretty much seeing our dirty underwear.

In that panel, you see the guy through a small opening in the door, and he's up on a ladder and he's saying, "Oh, really, maybe you'd like to show me how to do it." And the caption reads: "Marital tip: never wallpaper a small bathroom with a spouse."

Harrisburg, Pa.: Please describe your work process. Do you work at a steady pace, do you produce in batches, or does it vary?

Lance Aldrich: I think I explained that in an earlier answer. I sit there in my favorite chair, in the morning, because that's when I seem to be at my best, surrounded by three cats, and sometimes I don't come up with anything, other times I fill half a page. And when it's over, it's over, it's like the window closes and I don't go back to it the rest of the day. My favorite thing to do is to write Sundays, because instead of writing captions, I write tortured poetry and Gary just does cartoons based on the poem. It's fun because I just start with the first line and I don't know where it's going from there. I may just have a word in my head, like "lawnmower," and I just start writing and I don't know what I'm going to say about lawnmowers but by the time I'm done, it's a pretty funny poem. And then I send it to Gary, and if it's good, I'll hear him snort over the phone.

Houston, Tex.: I just wanted to say that I love your panel and always seem to either clip them or show them to my husband (and vice versa) regularly. Do you get your inspirations from your own family and friends?

Lance Aldrich: Absolutely. They say write what you know and, believe me, this is all I know. This may be sort of egotistical, but I think most people live the same kind of lives we do. There's nothing extraordinary in most people's lives. And it's just the daily little stumbles, you have to have humor to get through it. I think most people in a certain age range and a certain stage of life relate to our cartoon. It's like the kids' book, "Everybody Poops," some things are just universal. We don't have talking ants and grasshoppers. Our editor, Lee Salem, told us one of the reasons he liked our panels in the beginning is that it was fresh and unusual and funny and it wasn't one more "Far Side" ripoff.

Vienna, Va.: As a comic artist, do you think that your work is better received online or in print? Is there a trend in readership between the two?

Lance Aldrich: I'm guessing it's better online actually, because it's always in color online. I like it in color better, I think it's just happier in color. But I don't think there's any substitute for being in a newspaper. It lasts longer than the electrons stay together. I guess I'm old-fashioned about that. I like seeing my work in a

newspaper. I can't see people reading it online, but I can see people, in a restaurant with the paper folded open to the comics page, and know they're reading my cartoon. And the proof that people read it...They don't cut out the online version and put it under the glass on the hardware countertop. We've been out in the desert shooting commercials, and gone into a little hardware store, and there's one of our panels. That's a real high. There's no replacing that. I think there's an unfortunate trend away from newspaper readership. Both of my sons, who are 35 and 34, don't subscribe to a newspaper. I think that's sad. And I think it's even worse the younger the demographic gets.

Deming, N.M.: Do you ever face writers block? If so, how do you overcome it? If not, how do you believe you are avoiding it?

Lance Aldrich: I wonder every week when I send Gary two pages and so of ideas, if I'm done...if I'm ever going to have another idea. But then I do, and I've been doing it for 13 years and I felt the same way for 38 years in advertising, so I guess I was wrong. When I have writer's block, I just write SOMETHING. If I'm sitting in that chair and I look across the room and I see a magazine rack, I just write "magazine rack." I may not use it for 2 years, I may never use it, or I may use it the next week. So you have to write stuff down, because if you don't, it's dust in the wind, you'll never see it again. It's scary as hell. It really is. I'm sure every writer of every kind--Ernest Hemingway used to call it facing the great white bull, facing the blank page. It's the way I've always written. I write the first sentence and I go from there.

Silver Spring, Md.: What online sites carry your comic?

Lance Aldrich: Besides The Washington Post, you can always find it at ucomics.com, which is Universal Press Syndicate's online site. Usually we get lists when they send us a check of what papers are buying it, whether it's online or in print. I'm afraid I never look. I just rip off the check and go to the bank.

Lyme, Conn.: If you could do something in addition to your comic

strip, what else would you like to do?

Lance Aldrich: You know, I'd like to go out and beat the living hell out of people who abuse animals. But it's illegal, so I mostly settle for working in the yard and playing with my grandchildren and going up to our lake cottage in Northern Michigan.

Detroit, Mich.: How long did it take you to get your cartoon syndicated?

Lance Aldrich: I think I told the story of how we got syndicated in my first answer. But everybody says we were damn lucky to get any response at all besides "Go away and stop bothering me." It's really amazing. It's particularly amazing when I look at the early stuff we did, it's just not that good. Our art style has evolved and I think we really know what our voice is after 13 years. My partner, Gary, is a genius. He's every bit as funny a writer as he is a cartoonist. I'm firmly convinced he could do this without me, although he says he couldn't, God bless him.

Vienna, Va.: How did you come up with the idea for your script and how long does it take to generate a storyline?

Lance Aldrich: We don't have characters, we don't have storylines, although the same little round man--it's a type--always appears. And I'm afraid that's me. Gary sort of draws me, I'm the prototypical schmo. It's new every day. That's one of the reasons it's so scary. You start with nothing to build on. You can't have Ed getting ready for his speech at the PTA meeting for a week, you know. We think in comic strips like we did in advertising, like in 30-second time slots and one-page print formats. It's just the way we were trained to think. That's why I'd never be able to write a novel. I just can't carry on a conversation with myself for that long. So each day it's like starting over. Our editors say that this is the toughest kind of strip to do, because there's no past or future to lean on, it's always in the moment. But even though you don't have characters, you develop personality types, and to that extent, it makes it a little easier because I know who we are. So if it sounds like me and my wife, Donna, or it sounds like Gary and his wife, Rhonda, then we're pretty sure it's going to sound like somebody else out there.

Suzanne Tobin: What do you think about what should happen to your comic when you're finally ready to give it up? One of the big topics I always hear is the tension between people who want to see Peanuts in the paper every day, even though they're reruns, and people who want all the strips whose original creators are no longer doing them, to be dropped from the paper. What's your take on that?

Lance Aldrich: Personally, I think when it's over for me, it's over and I really don't care what they do with the strip. If Gary decides to continue it, it's fine. When I'm done with it I'll be ready to walk away, and if Gary carries it on and it's still funny, then I'll read it.

I would have preferred to see old "Peanuts" strips run for the next 10 years. I read "Lord of the Rings" three times. When something is really good, you just don't get tired of it. But strips like "Peanuts" are the exception to the rule.

I don't think comics are as good when someone other than the creator takes them over.

My earliest recollection of comics was sitting on the sofa when I was about 6, and my dad read me "Pogo" each day, which was way over my head at the time, but I always remember that, and I have all the "Pogo" compilations now, and I re-read them all the time. Some things are so good they just never get old.

I'm not sure we're in that class but if some editor is willing to pay for "classic" "Real Life Adventures" I'll be happy to continue to go to the bank.

Lance Aldrich: Thanks to everybody for showing up. Thanks to anybody for showing up. If you want to see us in The Washington Post newspaper, please whine to them by calling the number or sending an e-mail that they print each day in the paper under the crossword puzzle. If I seem to be begging, it's because I am. Thank you, Suzanne